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AUTHOR Hulsebosch, Pat; Koerner, Mari
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ABSTRACT

Adding a multiplicity of voices to the conversation about teaching and learning in schools, this paper presents the life histories of six culturally diverse teachers who have been meeting for over 2 years to discuss the connections to past life experiences and to other teachers. The paper suggests that these life histories (written by the teachers) offer the potential for understanding how their diversity might contribute to teacher-student interactions. The life histories discuss: (1) teachers' decisions to bring their home culture into their teaching; (2) how their experiences have molded their identity; (3) racism and sexism in the classroom; and (4) struggling to prevent the culture of non-white children from being overlooked, downplayed, and misunderstood. The paper concludes that developing instructional programs that incorporate the life experiences, language, and skills that students bring with them into the classroom improves students' academic performance and provides students with the skills and strategies they need to succeed in the broader society. (Contains 10 references.) (RS)

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What Does Cultural Identity Have to Do with the Preparation of Teachers?

Case Studies of "Culturally-Aware" Teachers

Presented at the
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by

Pat Hulsebosch
National-Louis University
18 S. Michigan Avenue
Chicago, IL 60603

Mari Koerner
Rossevelt University
430 S. Michigan Ave.
Chicago, IL 60605

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Cultural Identities and Teaching:
Case Studies of Culturally Aware Teachers

Introduction

The past few years have seen a dramatic increase in the public discussion and debate on the role of race, ethnicity, gender, and cultures in education. In teacher education, the theoretical discussions have been, perhaps, less controversial, as changing demographics, the discontinuity between the teaching force and the students, and the failure of our schools to adequately educate a full third of its students have made diversity a pressing issue A.A.C.T.E, 1988; Trent, 1990; Grant, and Secada, 1990).

Teacher education programs have begun to articulate programs that enable teachers to not only teach diverse groups of students, but also to develop the educational perspectives and skills necessary to combat inequities in access to knowledge and power (Liston and Zeichner, 1990; Ross and Smith, 1992). Often when teacher educators write about their experiences in developing such programs, a chief concern is the contrast between the "standpoint" (Harding, 1993) of the typical teacher education student (i.e., White, middle-class, female), and those of the diverse students they will be teaching. Although there is clearly a need to develop a teaching work force that mirrors the cultural diversity of student populations, we have little understanding of what teachers from diverse backgrounds bring to their pedagogy. Life histories of culturally diverse students who are planning to become teachers offer the potential for understanding how their diversity might contribute to teacher-student interactions.

The Context

We are focusing on the relationship between our individual experiences associated with cultural identities, our images of teaching, and how these images and experiences translate into teaching practice with diverse student groups. We have been meeting for over two years to dialogue about these connections; the connections to past life experiences, the connections we have with each other as culturally aware teachers, and the connections we have with other teachers.

We do not speak for all teachers, but want to add a multiplicity of voices to the conversation about teaching and learning in schools. Historically, our voices have not made their way into foundation courses of American education. We hope by sharing our stories, collectively, we can learn from each other. Finally, we all agree that we see teaching as a political act, as a way to transform society. We represent ourselves as decent, thoughtful, honest people who teach with integrity. It is with that pledge we share our stories.

* My name is Ana Maria Orbe-Lugo. I'm a Chicago public school teacher and a product of the public school system. The exclusion of home culture during my scholastic years proved to be an almost undefeatable obstacle. However my home culture proved to

be the impetus needed to overcome this obstacle.

I attended Fredrick Funston grammar school for nine years. The school reflected the community's white, middle class socio-economic status. Throughout my nine years at Funston, the community as well as the school's student population reflected the socio-economic and cultural shift. This shift did not include the teacher population, which was predominately Anglo in a Hispanic community. This difference in home culture became apparent and oppressive as I entered the middle grades. Up to this point I had always been perceived as being intelligent and having potential. The turning point came when I was no longer able to suppress my home culture. The change was gradual and subconscious. This was when I developed an outsider status: a status I did not seek or understand at the time, but one which served to further alienate me from the school's culture (Anglo). This alienation propelled me to abandon my belief in education. I attempted to get expelled or drop out. I had become a statistic, doing my time, until I could legally leave the school system. Being able to identify with my culture, value who I was for the very same differences that had made me "wrong" now made me proud! I was no longer ashamed of my culture, language, physical features, and heritage. This awakening of the subliminal oppression created unchanneled anger within me. I was fortunate enough to have been able to use this anger to propel my desire to prove the dominant culture wrong. This did not dissipate the anger within.

Upon completion of my teacher preparation I was still unaware that my greatest lessons and challenges were still ahead of me. Ironically my first teaching position was at Fredrick Funston, my elementary school. After being away for so many years, I returned to find the same exclusive school culture. Even though the community had gone through drastic and impoverishing changes the faculty maintained the same erroneous idealogy; the minority school culture still held fast to their belief that the majority community was culturally deficient. I soon came to the realization that the subliminal process to assimilate the children into the minority school culture was still in effect.

This prompted me to bring my home culture into my teaching as a way of enabling the children to bring their home culture into the school, so they could feel free to express and maintain their true identities, rather than be assimilated.

* Mari Koerner:

The experiences I draw upon, as a child growing up in a working class, first generation Italian family on the West Side of Chicago, center around being an integral part of the family. I didn't have my own bedroom (or bed for that matter) and slept with an older aunt for my entire childhood. The dining room was the place where the adults gathered after dinner to listen to the radio, sew or read while my sister and I did our work. My mother worked the evening shift. There were no baby sitters in my life even though my mother worked full time. Instead, being a member of an extended family, my mother's sisters took care of us. We were brought to every function as full participants. We went to wakes, funerals, weddings, church and visits with other relatives.

I took from this a real sense of belonging and being valued. My needs were regarded with the same, if not more, importance as any member of the family. What I wanted to do almost always took precedence as adults listened to me read, kept me company while I got dressed or got out of bed in the middle of the night to get me a drink of water. I can clearly remember all of this and being able to appreciate most of it even at that young age. The patience and respect I got as a child still influence the way I see my relationships with family, friends, colleagues and students today.

In the classroom this means that I believe in the importance of being respectful and kind. I work on patience, but I realize it's importance. I am clearly aware of the differentiation in roles between the teacher and the student, with the teacher having to take the bulk of responsibility for making the classroom a good place to spend time in. I also know the importance of the classroom milieu and work to maintain it as a comfort zone for me as the teacher and the students as well. In practice this means that I am on the lookout for students who feel outside the loop, who are pushed aside by other students. This is true for the curriculum as well. I include people who have been traditionally left out of history; women, working class people, ethnic or racial minorities.

By telling my own personal stories and making students' educational autobiographies an assignment, I try to show that I value personal histories and responses as sources of knowledge and that they therefore become part of the curriculum of the classroom. I try to remember stories students have shared and build upon them in class activities or refer to them in personal remarks before and after class. I also see my relationship with students extending beyond the semester and make myself try to be available as their advocate.

* Debbie Menchaca:

I am a Chicago Public School teacher and I teach 3rd grade on the near west side. My purpose in being here today is to relate how my experiences have molded my identity, how who I am is reflected in my classroom and how I create an environment where children are in the process of creating their own.

I am a Filipino-Irish-Dutch-German-Cherokee-American. My parents did not cultivate either of their respective cultural traditions in our house as I was growing up and so, I feel, if pressed for a cultural identity, I must identify myself as an "American". I have been raised to believe in consumerism and competition. I wear blue jeans; eat hot dogs; I go to church only during a crisis, otherwise I work. I grew up wanting a house with two bathrooms and a big lawn, an American-made car and to be president of the U.S. (even though it dawned on me early that this was impossible for a girl, I still secretly harbored that desire).

At home it was easy defining a cultural identity, I just turned on the T.V. It was going out into the world that was hard. I insulted Filipinos by being "culturally" ignorant. I didn't speak the language or know the traditions. I had never been "back home". But

my father's people were easy compared to my mother's Irish-Dutch-German people who considered me black.

I was aware, at a very young age, that who I was became defined by where I was. I started first grade in South Carolina. I was the darkest child in the class and was treated accordingly. In second grade we moved to Brooklyn, NY and there I was the lightest child in the mostly African-American and Hispanic class. I was treated as if, within one year, I had somehow developed more intelligence! These are my happiest memories of grade school. In sixth grade my father decided that the public schools in Brooklyn were too dangerous and transferred us into private Catholic schools. Imagine my shock when I learned that I wasn't the brightest kid in school any more and, instead of my name being called for spelling and math competitions, the pretty blond, blue-eyed girl was chosen! It took me many years to develop trust in my own natural abilities and not believe that I was only as intelligent as someone else labeled me.

Sometimes I think being only one race would have been easier. If I was Mexican, Chinese, Italian, Polish, African-American, things might have been simpler. I would have culture and traditions and I would belong. On the other hand, it was easier not being so easily identifiable. As a result, some doors have been open to me that ordinarily would not have been.

I could hide race but I could not hide sex. Being female has been more of a burden to me in this society than my multi-ethnic background. The worst part has been acknowledging this while fighting the arguments that every injustice done to me has all been for my own good. Not only am I labeled disruptive and disagreeable in challenging my role as a female in this society, but I'm also tagged ungrateful. This was overwhelming as a child. I remember asking my dad for a bike as a kid and being told no because it was too dangerous to ride up and down the street, and too hard for me to carry up and down the stairs to our third floor apartment. Not a year had gone by when he bought my younger brother a bike and guess who wound up taking that thing up and down the stairs?

School was worse. I was told in third grade not to worry about the difficulty I was having in Math because I was such a good reader and girls didn't have to worry about that kind of stuff. In my all-girls high school I remember our study hall teacher yelling at us because one of our group had the audacity to say "tampon" out loud. The teacher was mad because "what if one of the janitors hears you?" To this day I wonder, was she really that concerned that grown men might learn that females menstruate? Why should we have monitored our conversations? Why was I supposed to care what men think?

These are just some of the more obvious examples of sexism in my life. There are many more subtler examples - things like having to wear a dress, then being taught to keep my legs closed because God forbid I might be responsible for tempting some pure boy-child by the sign of my underpants; being taught to be "lady-like"-translated-demure, non-assertive, subservient, attractive and pleasant; being taught that fighting is a boy's

occupation - girls learn to compromise. The worst of the lessons are only beginning. I am becoming less valuable in this society as I become older and leave my child-bearing years. What am I going to be good for once my children have grown up and moved on with their new families?

Even though all these experiences I have talked about have been troublesome and frustrating, they are valuable learning experiences. There is purpose and meaning in all experiences. One can choose to ignore it or do something with it. I choose not to ignore it. In regards to the race issues, I try to expose my 3rd graders to different cultures through reading and the media, both of which have become more culturally sensitive. I have planned field trips outside of the neighborhood to expose them to different cultures. We don't have to go far to experience Polish, Greek, Chinese or Italian cultures.

Even more important than exposing them to outside cultures, is trying to build up their self-esteem and self-images as people. I feel that any child, no matter what cultural background, who feels confident in him or herself, will be able to interact positively with other types of people. Those positive interactions will lead to more productive relations among all people. This theory also applies to issues between men and women. If boys and girls are treated respectfully and validated in their own right, they will learn to treat others the same way.

A caring teacher is in a powerful position. I am aware of how influential I am in molding my students' characters and future perceptions and behaviors. With that power comes responsibility, a responsibility to spend a lot of time evaluating my feelings in regards to race and sex. I think a lot about what power and control mean to me. I try to focus on what goals I have for this class, this year. I try to keep a sense of humor; I try to remember I am human; I say I'm sorry when I'm wrong and I hug them when they cry. My room is comfortable and clean. Rules and consequences are few and displayed for easy referral. If two children have a dispute, they are given time to resolve the dispute privately. I am rarely asked to officiate. We have daily journals where students express feelings, wishes, desires and hates. My students are allowed, whenever, possible to make choices and decisions.

In short, I think of what was lacking in my education and I consider how I would like to be treated in their shoes.

* Pat Hulsebosch:

The most important, the simplest, and yet, the most difficult way in which I express my identity in my teaching is by first of all, remembering all of my identities, even the ones which don't seem to fit with who I am as a teacher. Since I first realized that I really was going to graduate and be a "professor", I have been uneasy with what that would mean for me. A recent letter from my Texan "othermother" (Troester, 1984) Dolly, in which she told me she was afraid to write me "since I got my Ph.D. and she was still so 'uneducated' has confirmed some of those fears. Graduating implied a requirement to assume a certain

elitist language, (one which-I have to concentrate to remember the rules of) listen to certain music (i.e., classical), and act in certain ways (calm, dignified, rational) – the way you know, "professors" act. As I came close, and then graduated I found myself rebelling against expectations to comply and conform (not even sure if they were my own or others'). I insisted to myself that I was not going to listen to National Public Radio and that I was going to continue to listen to Bob Seger's rock and roll. I thought carefully about what I would wear to teach, to visit schools, to attend meetings. And I became uncomfortably conscious when I was using Southern Slang instead of Standard English.

Some of my identities have met with less resistance. I have always been most proud and most comfortable with incorporating the "mother" (and now grandmother) part of me into my teaching because, to me, they've always felt so compatible. Others have been harder and later in staying with me in my teaching: my lesbian identity, for example. Reading and hearing others write and talk about the blending of their identities has helped me to value that integration more and more. I remember being struck by hearing Patti Lather six years ago talk about the lesbian singer Cris Williamson at an AERA presentation. And probably the most moving presentation I've ever heard was one in which Dianne Smith wove the relationship between Shug and Celie from The Color Purple into her AERA presentation on womanism last year (Smith, 1993).

When I'm teaching, I want to try to consider what we're talking about from many perspectives. Realizing that there are different ways of seeing the same event is a first step. And realizing that I have first-hand, personal access to a limited number of these is an important second step. I can't speak for everyone, but I can speak for all of myself and that's my challenge. I see more and more that a Euro-American patriarchal culture is the taking-for-granted place into which I've been assimilated. I now force myself to stop and remember the other parts of me: the working-class part, the female part, the teenage mother part, the Southern part, the lesbian part. I find that mentioning these other perspectives or possibilities for life experiences is often an important first step as we discuss historical periods and events.

In my experience, mentioning "other" identities, ones that are not so popular, common, or celebrated, alone is likely to open the door for others to include their perspective and identities more than they might otherwise have done. I don't need to know everything about everyone, but I do need to create a classroom in which students can describe the educational history of a self-taught grandfather during the Mexican revolution or ask, "Why aren't there any pictures of black people at Hull House?"

* Veronica Johnson:

In September of 1990 I realized that I was black. I have always known the shade of my skin - but was lost in knowing the color of my culture.

I knew that my ancestors had been bought and brought to this country in chains, subjected to the most gruesome horrors and robbed of their freedom. I have learned all

about Rosa Parks and the crimes against blacks during the turbulent 60's and all of the years preceding them. I have had friends who have come up against the injustice of corporate racism and sexism. But what did I know about my culture? What had my people brought to this land? What had they left behind?

It wasn't until after I had completed my undergraduate studies that I began to search for answers - clues to who, what, and why I existed. And the more I discovered the angrier I became, not because the picture of what I had found was not what I had hoped it to be, but because of all that had been denied, information conveniently forgotten, purposely deleted.

For a long time, I have been what America and it's educational system has wanted me to be - a black person who thought their blackness did not matter and should be forgotten, or at the very least camouflaged. It was made very clear that there was only two things a person could be - white or wrong. I was determined not to be wrong. So I assimilated the white culture. I became an American. I spoke white, dressed white, dreamed white. And throughout my life and educational experience this behaviors was commended and applauded. In school it was subtly suggested that success only came in the form of blond hair and the bluest of eyes. If you wanted to make it you did not wear your hair in an afro, eat collard greens and hammocks, or read Langston Hughes. Instead you wore your hair like the white girls in shampoo ads, ate Brie and water cress sandwiches, and devoured the works of Shakespeare and Keats - real authors, literary genius. To ensure your place in society you want to an ivy league school - not a black university that spoke of heritage or culture - but a good all-American university. So, I followed the rules, but who was I? Where did I fit in? After a while it became obvious my place was not in the America that had been shown to me. You, see, I could assimilate or "act white" all I wanted - but I could never be white, never fully have the same privileges, never ever be treated equally. I had been lied to, my path was not the road to success and happiness, but despair and confusion.

All around me I heard what was said about what and who I was -it screamed at me from every radio, T.V. and the eyes of every white store clerk who followed me around while I bought their white products from their white store to use on my black person. And I woke up. I knew what had been done to me - what I had been robbed of - my culture my identity as a black women living in America.

This is one of the reasons why I decided to become a teacher. Never again will I allow my culture - or the culture of non-white children whose ancestors gave so much to the existence of this world to be overlooked, downplayed, misunderstood. I have decided to teach the truth and expose the reality of all that has been hidden. I want the knowledge my students develop to be complete.

No longer will I support a class system of education that excludes people of color or women. I will not let my students believe that their thoughts and questions and opinions

are not important, that their faces are not beautiful, that they are an UN – unbecoming, uncivilized, unclean, uncouth, unemployable, unfit, uneducable, unimportant. I want them to realize the strength and power in diversity.

To know that we are not all the same, nor were we meant to be. Our thoughts, feelings, values, and perceptions are different, unique, and should be held up for all to see, enjoy, savor. But most importantly I want them to feel good about who they are - as well as where Africa, Asia and Mexico is on the map.

*** My name is Albert D. Delgado. I'm just beginning my second year of teaching in a small south suburb of Chicago. I am a Chicano by choice. I am one Chicano among many. To say that I am a Chicano should not lead one to think that I have restricted who I am to a mere label. I'd rather see myself, as the universal person, taking the idea from the Mexican philosopher Vasconcelos. I am proud of my Native American and Spanish roots. If I go back deeper in my Spanish roots, I come face with my Moorish roots. I find my Native American roots point back across the now long disappeared land bridge back to Asia. Since, I teach in a primarily African-American school, I came to understand that Africa is the alpha of our human existence, the birthplace of the human race. I cannot feel but a sure connectedness to all the human race.**

This sense of connectedness or solidarity was for the most part learned at the dinner table listening to my parents converse about life. They opened me up to the diversity of people and cultures through trips to the museums. My parents interest in educational television and love of books opened up vistas to discover other people and cultures without leaving Chicago.

Catholic missionaries have played a very important part in my development. I wanted to be like the Irish and Italian missionaries that served my parish. Listening to their mission stories about distant places and cultures made the world a little bit smaller. At the age of twenty, I entered an experimental college seminary in the heart of East Los Angeles, the largest Latino barrio in the United States. Here I developed a stronger tie to my culture through working in the educational, civic and religious arenas of public life. Later, while in graduate school, I had the opportunity to live in a truly multicultural community, with foreign missionaries from all over the world and learn Spanish during a two year cross-cultural missionary experience in Mexico. Learning to read and write Spanish has opened up a whole new world for me. Being able to speak Spanish has been a passport to discovering and appreciating the larger Latino and Hispanic world.

I wish that my presence in the school would be just enough to say that the status quo in the school is changing. It is clear that mere presence is not enough, yet is a starting point. I speak Spanish when I have the opportunity with other staff. When my students hear me speak Spanish, they ask me to teach them Spanish. I find my students are ready and willing to learn Spanish as a second language. I feel glad that my students would want to learn Spanish and it shows that children are open to new cultural experiences.

During my pre-service training at National-Louis University, I was given the opportunity and freedom of coming up with my own educational philosophy. I was also introduced to a smorgasbord of progressive ways to teach. I have found myself trying to put my best intentions into practice. As a new teacher, I find that I have internal and external struggles. I find I must be patient with myself because I'd like to be a better teacher than I am now. I recognize that my exposure to sound cutting-edge ideas at work in the classroom is limited to my pre-service observation, journal articles and books. The external struggles seem to deal with working in a district that has no truly effective on-going district staff development program, and dealing with an administration that would like for staff to try hands-on "stuff" and thematic units and yet not supply the teachers with necessary materials, as well as expect us to teach-to-the-test and use traditional assessment tools.

One response, has been to be responsible for my own professional development. I've joined at least five professional organizations. I have found that the most satisfying experience has been my involvement with the Chicago Area Writing Project. The networking and learning from other teachers is helping me learn what it means to be a good teacher. This experience has helped me give the students a say into what they desire to write about and respecting them as budding writers who write from their own experience and cultural background. I have also found myself spending hundreds of dollars a year on classroom materials so that I have materials in order to teach more effectively. I buy paperbacks and posters that reflect some part of the African-American experience. I augment my social studies text with books written by African-American historians. I always try to keep my ears and eyes open for news notices concerning accomplishments of African-Americans who are now a success in different areas of life. Hopefully these stories will inspire my students to have a "can do" attitude toward life. I try to make sure that at least my students will not have to wait till they are in college, like I did, before I heard my culture recognized and validated in an educational institution.

I hope that the professors in pre-service education programs will engage the school districts, teacher unions, and parents in positive forums that will help schools transform themselves. at a time when public education is attacked for all sides, it is time for all of us to help the public understand that there are public schools that are experiencing success. I also encourage pre-service education program staff to not only recruit the new inner city majority students, but also validate their culture and individual experiences to thus learn from them in order to develop more effective education programs in the near future.

Conclusion

Home culture refers to cultural identity which consists of several identities including gender, race, sexual preference, ethnic backgrounds. We express and maintain our own identity in our teaching by including our home culture within the school's culture. In order to create a classroom environment in which students feel free to express and maintain their identities we also need to include their home culture.

The mismatch between the school and home cultures puts students at a disadvantage for learning. The disadvantage is not created by the diversity among teachers and students, but by the practice of assimilation as opposed to inclusion of the student's culture. This is also true for the teacher whose home culture is also not allowed inclusion, but who also is expected to conform to the school's culture.

Language is the largest representation of the student's home culture. By not recognizing that diversity does not necessarily mean a deficiency in the standard language usage but a linguistic difference, students are forced into conformity. Students who do not conform are labeled or forced out of the system.

Developing instructional programs that incorporate the life experiences, language, and skills that students bring with them into the classroom improves students' academic performance, while at the same time providing those students with the skills and strategies they need to succeed in the broader society. (Delpit, 1986, 1988, 1992; Cazden & Mehan, 1989).

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